

THE WORLD-CHURCH.

By Rev. R. E. Fulton, D. D.

So much has been said and written and done of late in the direction of Pan-Protestantism, if not Pan-Christendom, it may be profitable to inquire into the desirability of such a state and the most effective method of attaining it. It has occurred to the writer that considerable emphasis should be placed upon the subject of Ecclesiology, using that term not in its narrower sense of denominational limits, but in the broader meaning of the nature, authority, constitution and purpose of the church. We hold to the identity of the church in all ages. It has been defined as "the community of the pious, separated spiritually from the rest of mankind, existing under a prescribed constitution through all time in order to bear witness to His person, authority, truth and grace, and to worship and glorify Him before the world." Its history may be conveniently divided into three periods: the Patriarchal, Hebraic, and Christian, representing the three distinct forms under which it has existed. During the first two periods the ecclesiastical limits were rather circumscribed, due to the fact that this was the stage of preparation. God's people were receiving the revelation of the plan of salvation, digesting it, being trained themselves to be missionaries of the evangel. Paul tells us that in this matter they were minors, novitiates, children to be taught. The Teacher found it necessary to employ objects of sense in order to introduce the spiritual. Many earnest souls learned the lesson, and, rising above the sensuous, joyfully embraced the doctrine of a salvation by faith. Others remained the children of Abraham, according to the flesh only, to the end of their lives.

From the day of Pentecost, the church having received its "treasure in earthen vessels," entered upon the grand work of evangelizing the world, of establishing a world-church. Any student of Scriptures knows that this idea is entirely scriptural. The instances of Cornelius, of Paul's converts, of the Jerusalem council, as also the doctrine of the universality of the church taught in both the Old and the New Testaments, make it plain that God is no "respector of persons," but will gather all those from every nation who are the children of Abraham by faith. Yet, however scriptural and in accordance with the plan of God this was, human ambition entered in, and the missionary spirit lapsed into lust for ecclesiastical empire. Rome cast the spell of her name over all Europe. The popes grasped at the falling scepter of the Caesars, and, mounting the imperial throne, assayed to unite all Christendom in one organization with one head. The maxim of Cyprian "extra ecclesiam nulla salus," was eagerly embraced. The Church was conceived of as one and indivisible, a visible organization, having a recognized center, one code of laws, one belief, one mode of worship. Hence there were Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity from the days of Cloris and Charlemagne, through Charles V and Philip II, to Henry VIII and Elizabeth. James Bryce describes in his inimitable way, how, for many centuries, Europe supposed that a world-state and a world-church were absolutely indispensable to one another and to human society. The pope crowned the emperor, the emperor fought for the pope. Yet they were far from harmonious. Some of the bloodiest wars of the European nations were due to the ambitious designs of the popes, who did not hesitate to foment strife between sovereigns only to increase the prestige and

power of the papacy. This was the natural sequence of the church's invasion of the province of the state. The mediaeval Church aimed at organic union and employed all the means of coercion devisable by a Satanic imagination for its attainment, but it had not the unity for which the Head of the Church prayed. Unity is intelligent, not ignorant; unity is action, a perfectly articulating mechanism, not a form for the flowing metal. Therein lies the difference between union and unity. There were some minds during this period who dared to think, as William of Uccom, Morsilius of Padua, and others.

Now does the Church of to-day, the Protestant Church, want a world-church? I say, yes, most heartily, but of the scriptural type. A church, which, though not having the artificial externality of organic union, yet presents the real unity for which our Lord prayed.

"The Church's one foundation

Is Jesus Christ, her Lord;

She is his new creation

By water and the word;

From heav'n he came and sought her

To be his holy bride;

With his own blood he bought her,

And for her life he died.

"Elect from every nation,

Yet one o'er all the earth,

Her charter of salvation

One Lord, one faith, one birth;

One holy name she blesses

Partakes one holy food,

And to one hope she presses,

With every grace endued."

Our book of Church Order declares that, "It is according to scriptural example that the Church should be divided into many particular Churches." The division of the one Church into several denominations is due to three main causes—natural, social, and political; temperamental differences, the general arrangement of society, the forms of civil government. What, then, are the essential works of the church by which it may be known throughout the world in all ages. "The visible church, which is also Catholic, or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation as before, under the law), consists of all those throughout the world, that profess the true religion, together with their children, and is the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation." Reference has already been made to Rome's definition of the Church. The Anglicans make apostolic succession the chief mark of the church and the controversy in England over a *jure divino* Episcopacy and a *jure divino* Presbyterianism will be recalled. Practically all churches follow the Apostle's Creed in professing faith in the holy "catholic" church, but become very self-conscious when the question of which one is "catholic" is raised. Calvin, the exponent of the Reformed view, held that any church is a true church in which are found belief in the gospel, the preaching of the word, and due administration of the sacraments. Quoting again from our confession: "This catholic church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less, visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them. The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error: And some have become so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Never-

theless, there shall be always a church on earth to worship God according to his will."

The two main objects of the church's existence are worship and testimony. The authority given by Jesus, the Head, is declarative and ministerial only. Now is the organic union of all the particular churches essential to the realization of this mission? History does not prove it. The period when this was the case was the period of the church's least vitality. The salt had well-nigh lost its savor. She was least "visible" when she had the highest form of "organic" union. It was then that her testimony was weakest. But God, in His providence, again ushered in the day when every one might say to his neighbor, "Know the Lord," so that we are now much nearer the time when all shall know Him, from the least to the greatest. The apostle's analogy of the church to the human body is still indicative of the most effective way, for each of the distinctive groups of Christians has a very important function toward this body of Christ. While there is a diversity of gifts there is one spirit. No, the scriptural method for rendering the church more visible is not in placing supreme emphasis on government, bringing all believers under one ecclesiastical dominion, but in every church member becoming a living epistle, known and read of all men, a lively stone in the temple of God, presenting his body a living sacrifice, witnessing to the otherworldness of Christ's kingdom. It is the candid opinion of the writer that the church of to-day is greatly in need of a revival of apostolic religion." The present European war has convinced all of that fact. When deism held the day during the eighteenth century in England and America, Jonathan Edwards sent out his call to prayer. It was the earnest prayer of God's people, coupled with the straightforward preaching of the word that brought in the "Great Awakenings." Let us have more praying Christians, more personal workers. Let every member hear the missionary call. Let our public services be spiritual and not a bidding for the world by an appeal to the aesthetic and hedonic. Let the ministry be truly an office of instruction, the unfolding of divine truth, the general education of believers and their children, and of all who are willing to hear the word. Let the officers rule in meekness and love. We have been at church courts and heard much discussion as to the best "method" of doing the Lord's work, whereas a bare handful could be gotten together for morning prayer. The cry is "business first," as if the whole of the court's activities were not the Lord's business. With the universal spiritual conception of the church we link ourselves with the church of the patriarchs, of the apostles, of all that cloud of witnesses with which we are compassed about. This is a much nobler conception and more inspiring. I leave with you the following remark of Morris: "The spirit of hierarchy is the ever-threatening peril, the chiefest evil, of organic Christianity. The only possible antidote lies in the broadcast, most continuous and urgent enunciation of the holy precept of our Lord, embodied for His church through all time in the golden sentence, 'I am among you as one that serveth.'" Let us labor and pray that the church of the Lord Jesus Christ may become more and more visible, more and more manifest, until his kingdom may come.

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True bravery is shown by performing without witnesses what one might be capable of doing before all the world.—La Rochefoucauld.